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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by Presbyterian Church (USA), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its predecessor denominations have consistently worked for the rights of women in church and society. In consultation with partners around the world, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has recognized women's importance in shaping development policy. Women's organizations began forming in the Presbyterian Church in the early 1800s. They led the way in advocacy on a variety of issues, including gender justice. Presbyterians, including women's groups, have worked, and continue to work, for the eradication of poverty and hunger through financial and personal support of feeding programmes and initiatives that address the root causes of poverty and hunger in their own communities and around the world.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and its international mission partners, including members of the World Communion of Reformed Churches, recognize the important roles that women play in sustainable development and ending hunger and poverty.

Food security

Hunger and malnutrition owing to food insecurity are increasing. Communities where resources were once abundant now struggle to provide adequate food. Food-producing land is often reserved for agribusinesses rather than for local farms. This lack of access to, and ownership of, farming/fishing land compounds the challenges to rural food security. The lack of farm inputs, such as seeds and fertilizer and the need for better farming methods, exacerbate these challenges.

Access to clean water and effective irrigation methods continue to be problematic despite the advances made through the initiatives of the Millennium Development Goals. These problems disproportionately affect women living in rural areas.

Presbyterian General Assemblies have long advocated for food security and justice in the policies that Governments enact, as in a 1981 call to the President and Congress of the United States of America to cease and desist from employing food as a weapon of diplomacy and to make the elimination of hunger the primary focus of the relationship of the United States with developing countries.

The 212th General Assembly (2000) of the Presbyterian Church (USA) instructed the Committee on Mission Responsibility Through Investment to: study the impact of multinational corporations on the decline of rural communities and their social fabric; advise the trustees and foundations of the church's governing bodies about any corporate shareholder resolutions that could have either a deleterious or positive impact on rural communities and, where possible, to take action on such resolutions in support of family farmers and ranchers; and advocate within the multinational corporation systems on behalf of the vitality and stability of rural communities, and on behalf of family farmers and ranchers.

In response to the recent global food crisis, the 218th General Assembly (2008) urged the church to appeal to all Presbyterians to donate to a special fund to support our overseas partners, produce relevant resources to raise awareness of this crisis, and advocate with the United States Government, the World Bank and other organizations to increase financial assistance for agricultural development.

Access to education

Presbyterians affirm the importance of free, public education. Reports from women around the world indicate that high rates of illiteracy hinder the development potential of girls and women. Access to education is particularly challenging in rural areas owing to the lack of infrastructure, trained teachers and schools.

Early marriages and pregnancies, imbalances in caregiving and childcare responsibilities, cultural norms and financial need may prevent women from taking advantage of educational opportunities in rural areas in the United States and around the world.

Education related to nutrition, health and hygiene, farming practices and income-generating skills can increase the development opportunities not only for women but also for their whole communities.

Access to medical care

Presbyterians affirm the importance of access to medical care. Rates of infant and maternal mortality and morbidity remain high in rural areas because of the lack of access to adequate medical care. The practice of women serving as medical caregivers for the family and community, often without proper protection (especially in situations involving HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and other contagious diseases), and the time that women spend caring for the sick can prevent women from pursuing education or developing other marketable skills. Increasing access to trained medical care in rural areas can increase the opportunities for women and girls to live healthy lives. The training of rural women as medical care providers can help to ensure that women are paid adequately for the care they provide.

Housing, land and property

The Presbyterian Church (USA) and our partners recognize that displacement owing to violence and forced evictions, with no relocation assistance or compensation for seized lands, disproportionately hurts women, who often lack the required documentation to demonstrate land ownership. A lack of the required property documentation of land ownership can further contribute to violations of existing housing rights; a lack of affordable housing and a lack of access to farming and fishing land continue to keep rural women impoverished at rates far greater than those of their urban or male counterparts.

Violence against women

Presbyterians have consistently called for the prevention of domestic violence and sexual assault. Women around the world report a high level of impunity for acts of gender-based violence. Isolation and poverty make women and girls in rural areas especially vulnerable to such violence. Presbyterians have committed significant resources to education, advocacy and support with a view to preventing gender-based violence, and to initiatives that encourage healing and recovery.

Recommendations

Based on the experiences of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and its international partners, including members of the World Communion of Reformed

Churches, in addressing the aforementioned issues, the Presbyterian Church (USA) offers the following recommendations.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages Member States to increase gender equality for all women and consult women on the ground with a view to gaining local expertise when attempting to solve the problems that women face. The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages Member States to take action to increase women's access to education, medical care, housing, land and property, and to support and create programmes for government development assistance that is gender-based. The Presbyterian Church (USA) encourages the United Nations to monitor and report on issues of violence against women and to hold Member States accountable for diminishing the rights of women.

Member States should provide adequate funding for training programmes in support of women's projects, including small-scale farming projects, cooperatives and other businesses.

Cultivating crops for self-sustenance and forming small-scale farming cooperatives have helped women and their communities to address the crucial questions related to food security. Member States should develop and implement policies that will strengthen small-scale farmers. Government protection of small farms and a legal environment that supports those farms and cooperatives will help to increase food security and improve the lives of women in rural areas.

Access to basic human rights such as food and education should not depend on a person's gender or where in their State they were born. Action by Member States to improve the educational opportunities and environments for women and girls, especially in rural areas, will promote a stronger global economy.

Member States should create legal and economic structures that allow individuals to engage in microbusiness enterprises to generate income. Member States should help women to share their knowledge and skills through educational workshops and courses. Member States should allow food policy to be based on local, democratic control, recognizing that local solutions are often the most effective for local problems.

Access to health care and supportive services should be available for all people everywhere, not just for those who live in urban areas. Member States should work to ensure access to medical care for all their citizens. Member States should support programmes that provide care for the sick (in particular those affected by HIV/AIDS) and assist and support victims of domestic violence and abuse, especially in rural areas.

Conclusion

All people should have access to basic life-giving rights, such as nutritious food, housing and education. Women and girls advocate for these rights with their Governments and provide services, such as collecting food, clothing and other basic necessities to help in extending these rights to others. Member States should focus their efforts on matching the efforts of women and girls, especially those living in rural areas.